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SUBJECT The Bulgarian Connection

TED KOPPEL: Was Bulgaria involved in the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II, and did it act in behalf of the Soviet KGB? We'll focus on that story and on charges that Bulgaria has been involved in a whole range of terrorist activities in Italy. We'll talk live with a Bulgarian diplomat and with two experts on terrorism.

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KOPPEL: The Pope is said to believe that the Kremlin was behind the assassination attempt against him in May 1981. But that is not the sort of thing that Popes say publicly. It is not even the sort of thing that high Vatican officials will say in public. To make such charges requires proof, and then, perhaps even more difficult, a meaningful response.

What is happening now in Rome, however, is almost as surprising. The Italian government is coming very close to a direct accusation against the government of Bulgaria for complicity in the attack on the Pope. And Italian parliamentarians are now publicly drawing certain conclusions. Bulgaria, they say would not have acted without explicit instructions from the Soviet Union.

In just a few hours, in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, Bulgarian officials will deny and denounce those charges at a public news conference. In a few moments, we will be joined live by a Bulgarian official here in Washington.

But first, more details from Bill Blakemore, who's been unraveling the threads of this remarkable story in Rome for more than a year.

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BILL BLAKEMORE: "The facts say the time for hypotheses is now over," announced Italy's Prime Minister Fanfani here today in Parliament. "The facts which now have hard-won verification by our judiciary, beginning with the plot to kill the Pope." He told the chamber his government had recalled its ambassador to Bulgaria for an indefinite period and may take further measures against Bulgaria. If the attempt to kill the Pope had succeeded, he said, it would have been the gravest act of destabilization in the world in the past 60 years.

Three Bulgarian officials have now been named by magistrates, one of them arrested, in the conspiracy which sent Ali Agca to fire his gun at John Paul. And on Monday the government will debate openly in Parliament what it knows of Italy's Bulgarian connections.

Some parliamentarians here want complete revision of Italy's relations with the entire Soviet bloc. Some believe the Soviets control Bulgarian and the Kremlin is behind it all.

GEORGIO NAPOLITANO: We want to know the truth. We want an open discussion in Parliament.

BLAKEMORE: The Bulgarian Secret Service is now implicated here not only in the plot to kill John Paul, but also in Red Brigades terrorism and in huge drug- and gun-smuggling operations.

The terrorism connection emerged shortly after the Red Brigades kidnapping here a year ago of American General James Dozier. Italian union official Luigi Scricciolo was arrested, charged with being a go-between for Bulgarian spies with the kidnapers. Scricciolo was also the first Western labor union official to meet Lech Walesa in Poland. Scricciolo helped arrange Walesa's visit to see the Pope in Rome two years ago. And media reports in Italy now claim Scricciolo has confessed to discussing with the Bulgarians a proposed plot to assassinate Walesa during that trip. True or not, these reports have fanned public concern about the Bulgarian connections.

The third case in which the Bulgarian Secret Service stands implicated here is a massive heroin-for-arms smuggling ring just broken. Investigators believe over 8000 pounds of unprocessed heroin was moved from the Middle East through Bulgaria to Palermo, Sicily for refining and shipment to the United States. The money from the heroin sales then going to buy arms, including tanks and helicopters, for the Middle East, especially Iran. The two-way deals for these operations, they say, were made in Bulgaria and included wealthy international businessman Bekir Celenk, who is Turkish. And Bekir Celenk, according to Italian investigators, is also deeply involved in the plot to kill the Pope.

Mehmet Ali Agca, in confessions which began early this year and are still coming out, claims he met Bekir Celenk in Bulgarian and that Celenk later offered him \$1 1/2 million to kill John Paul.

What proof there is for all this remains for the most part closely guarded by the Italian public prosecutors. Because of the potential international crisis their evidence could provoke, they are much in the spotlight now, particularly Magistrate Elario Martella, on the papal assassination case for over a year.

PAOLO GARIMBERTI: Magistrates are [unintelligible]. But we are not sure a hundred percent. I think we are in a very difficult point now. It's a kind of the position of an airplane going up, you know? There is a moment where -- when the plane is in a very difficult and dangerous position. We are in that position now.

BLAKEMORE: The rising drama of the Bulgarian affair will probably only be increased tomorrow when, the Bulgarians say, there will be a press conference in their capital attended in person by Bekir Celenk, alleged to have paid Ali Agca; the two Bulgarians named in the assassination case; and the wife of the Bulgarian under arrest here. Bulgaria claims it's being framed by the West.

The leader of one of Italy's three biggest labor unions, Giorgio Benvenuto, told ABC News today, "We cannot tolerate this situation. We have to take action. If Bulgaria is involved in Red Brigades terrorism, it is not a domestic issue. We have to get to the bottom of this Bulgarian thing."

Benvenuto believes that when Luigi Scricciolo was working for him he passed on sensitive information to Bulgarians about American labor union support for solidarity.

Leader of Italy's Social Democrat Party, Pietro Longo, said today, "Italy must freeze relations with Bulgaria if the proof is conclusive. The government must defend our country's dignity."

One Italian editor told me today, "If the alleged Bulgarian connections are proven in the end to be untrue, it would be a terrible blow for Italy, whose officials have now stuck their necks out, and a propaganda victory for the Soviet bloc. If they are true, it could mean a terrible crisis for Eastern Europe. Some has to win and someone has to lose," he said. "We need a third way out."

KOPPEL: Joining us now in our Washington Bureau is

Peter Dragnev, cultural attache at the Bulgarian Embassy here in Washington.

Mr. Dragnev, let's begin with the obvious question. I assume you're going to deny the charges. Why do you think the Italian government is preparing to make them? Why do you think so many Italian parliamentarians are making what is clearly such a provocative charge?

PETER DRAGNEV: Well, Ted, let me begin with expressing my gratitude to ABC for letting us be here and having the chance to see our understanding of the truth.

Of course, many Bulgarians, including myself and my colleagues in the Bulgarian Embassy, are very much indignantly offended by the groundless accusations and by the groundless suspicions towards the Bulgarian people, accused and allegedly accused, some of them, for being involved in assassination attempt on the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II, a Slav and a Pole.

And we all understand that certain circles in Italy are very much interested in distracting the attention from the original source of terrorism in the world, and especially in some of the Western countries. So my point is that these circles in various powers are doing their best to distract the attention of the world public opinion and allegedly to -- and to accuse innocent Bulgarian citizens.

KOPPEL: All right. Let me just ask you, when you talk about the original source of terrorism, you're referring to whom?

DRAGNEV: Well, I'm referring to the original sources of terrorism who swept some -- which swept some of the Western World, some of the Western countries.

KOPPEL: Yes, but who are you talking about?

DRAGNEV: Well, all these things and acts of violence which we reject, about terrorism against individuals and cities, and so on and so forth, which our theory and our practice and our state rejects.

KOPPEL: Are you talking about specific people? Are you talking about a particular group?

DRAGNEV: I'm principally -- I'm talking about the accusations, which we reject as a state and which our theory and party system rejects as a whole.

KOPPEL: We will have an opportunity to talk a little

bit later after we've heard some of the other charges that are being leveled against your government and against some Bulgarians in particular. But let me raise one question that I must say is of particular interest.

Mehmet Ali Agca was in Sofia. He did get a weapon in Sofia. And he seemed to travel rather freely in your country. And from what I know of Bulgaria, that is not an easy thing for a foreigner to do. How do you explain that?

DRAGNEV: Well, I'm not here to educate the American public. But I should mention a couple of things. Bulgaria is visited every year by four millions of tourists. Two millions of them are Turks. And you can imagine for a nine-million nation it would be very difficult and near impossible to monitor all of the foreigners being in Bulgaria and who is going to meet whom.

So I think these things to be spoken about, anybody meeting anybody as foreigners in Bulgaria is absolutely ridiculous.

KOPPEL: One of the sad confessions that one has to make about this country, Mr. Dragnev, is that it is easy to get a weapon here. It was my understanding that it is not so easy in your country to get a weapon. How did Mehmet Ali Agca get his weapon there?

DRAGNEV: Well, all these allegations have not been proved. Even there has not been an indictment against people of Bulgaria. These are all suspicions and, quote, revelations, unquote, by some of the publications.

KOPPEL: All right. We'll be hearing a few more of those revelations. And if you'll be good enough to stand by, we'll come back and chat with you a little later.

When we return, we'll talk with two leading experts on international terrorism. One of them, Claire Sterling, was one of the first journalists to investigate the possibility of Soviet involvement in the attack on the Pope.

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KOPPEL: Joining us now are two experts on international terrorism. Via satellite from London, American writer Claire Sterling, who has been writing about and investigating the possible communist connection to the attack on the Pope for more than a year. And here in our Washington Bureau, Dr. Yonah Alexander, Director of the Institute for Studies in International Terrorism at the State University of New York and editor-in-chief of an international journal on terrorism.

Claire Sterling, what -- about a year ago you and I talked about this subject, and at the time it sounded like rather wild speculation. You were pointing the finger at the Soviets then. What has happened in the last few weeks, do you think, that makes those what seemed to be unsubstantiated charges a year ago more realistic now?

CLAIRE STERLING: Well, the dramatic thing, of course, is that Judge Martella, who has been conducting this investigation in Italy since last fall, has arrested one Bulgarian, who was a flight director for the Balkan Airways, the Bulgarian airline, and has sought the arrest of two other Bulgarians. This is no longer in the realm of newspaper speculation. This is a judge of most meticulous reputation who would surely not have made such a move, with all its implications for Italian diplomacy and Western diplomacy, relations with Eastern Europe, if he did not have solid evidence.

Now, Mehmet Ali Agca, himself, is known to have begun to speak in a second and third interrogation which began last May. But again, Judge Martella is not the man who would ever go on the strength of a confession alone. Unless he had gotten confirmation, hard-fact confirmation of what Agca told him, he would never have moved to make these arrests.

I think that's what is making this case, that is creating this state of tension and drama in Italy at the moment.

KOPPEL: All right. Two quick questions. It's one thing to level charges against three individual Bulgarians. How does that implicate the Bulgarian government?

STERLING: Well, I think that nobody in the world of real politics assumes that members of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome or the flight manager of the Bulgarian airlines would be capable of acting as an individual citizen.

Apart from that, we do have independent evidence, all of us who have been working on this case, about the connection of Bulgarian, even be -- we have had this long before the judge ordered these arrests.

When Mr. Dragnev speaks about any number of millions of people passing through Bulgaria, this is quite true. But Mehmed Ali Agca was there for 50 days under very special circumstances, staying in very special and expensive hotels. He happened to have had his face on the front pages of the Turkish press, next door to Bulgaria, for some weeks as a sensational confessed murderer of the most important journalist in Turkey, Abdia Pecci (?), and again for his sensational escape from an invulnerable military prison, the Kajamartepi (?) prison in

Turkey. He was therefore a fugitive from justice of great celebrity and notoriety in Turkey, and surely in Bulgaria.

Therefore, it is just not logical to assume that the Bulgarian Secret Service was unaware of who he was and what he was for the 50 days he was harbored in Sofia. We begin with that...

KOPPEL: Let me go to Yonah Alexander here in Washington.

You don't necessarily believe that the Soviets, therefore, are implicated. Do you believe that the Bulgarian government is implicated?

YONAH ALEXANDER: Well, first, Ted, obviously we have to look at the role of terrorism in strategic terms. There is no question in my mind that even the powerful would resort to terrorism, not only the weak. So, by definition, the Soviets look at terrorism, if I may paraphrase Clausewitz, continuation of policy by other means. And therefore they would resort to terrorism or national liberation. So there is no denial about that.

But certainly the Soviets are very phlegmatic. They are very cautious. It's a question of cost-benefit relationship. And assuming that they were involved in this activity, certainly this would mean a psychological defeat for them and a political blunder, because not only this would implicate them in European terms, but also a negative reaction in the Third World.

So, therefore, I think we are discussing now a situation for which we don't have complete evidence and we cannot, obviously, draw any final conclusions.

KOPPEL: All right. But you're drawing rather empirical conclusions there: that therefore the Soviets wouldn't be involved because it wouldn't make any sense for them. It can be argued just as easily that they...

ALEXANDER: Well, at least, Ted, this is one school of thought: that for the Soviets, certainly in terms of their capabilities -- and there is no end to the imagination, let's say, of the KGB. There are some people who doubt whether the Soviets were indirectly involved in this connection.

KOPPEL: What about the Bulgarians?

ALEXANDER: Well, obviously we do have information in terms of the Bulgarian connection in this case, as well as many other cases, in terms of attempts to destabilize other countries,

such as Turkey.

KOPPEL: What about these specific charges? Do you believe that the Bulgarian government was involved?

ALEXANDER: Well, we don't have all the evidence, but we have to wait. But at any rate, in terms of the Soviet connection, one could raise these questions.

KOPPEL: Yeah, but I'm asking you first of all about the Bulgarian connection, because then the obvious next question is, does the Bulgarian Secret Service ever operate without the knowledge and acquiescence of the KGB?

ALEXANDER: Well, the question really is in whose benefit it is. And if we assume for a moment that the Bulgarians are acting for the KGB -- and I believe this is true -- then certainly if the Soviets are aiming at destabilizing Western societies, this would mobilize, I think, support against the Soviet Union at the same time they're trying to consolidate their hold and control over Eastern Europe. And certainly the assassination of Pope would not promote this aim.

KOPPEL: Claire Sterling, briefly if you would, mobilize your arguments against that.

STERLING: Yes. For one thing, I don't consider this a terrorist act or an attempt to destabilize in the sense that we've come to understand the use of terrorism. This was a crime of state, an attempt to eliminate physically a man who had become a mortal danger to the survival of the whole Soviet structure in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself because his presence as the head of the Roman Catholic Church was indispensable to the emergence and growth of the Solidarity free labor movement in Poland.

Therefore, the fact that he was in Italy may have been a factor of destabilization, but it was certainly not the major consideration for those who planned this attack.

As for the responsibility of the Soviet KGB, Soviet services, for whatever might have been done by the Bulgarian secret services, I would like to call to your attention an interview in last week's French left-wing daily Liberation by the former head of the Bulgarian Secret Service, Colonel Stefan Sverdlov (?), who says the Bulgarians are the favorites of the Soviet Union, in the secret services, because of a long tradition of terrorist activity and because they are the most secure and the most servile. He adds that they act autonomously only on their own national territory or within the Balkans. Whereas in operations of a truly international character, they always follow

the directives of the KGB, which has its own officials in every sector of Bulgarian espionage.

KOPPEL: Forgive me for cutting you off. I want to give Peter Dragnev, the cultural attache from the Bulgarian Embassy here in Washington, one opportunity to respond.

We have about a minute and a half left, Mr. Dragnev.

DRAGNEV: Well, I should say that we have -- we, Bulgaria, Bulgarians, have nothing in common with the terrorist acts in the world, on the Balkans or in any place of terror it might be.

KOPPEL: Please, if you would, let's not waste the time. Respond to some of the specific charges that have been made. How is it possible that the Bulgarian government could not have known who Mehmet Ali Agca was?

DRAGNEV: Well, it's quite possible because so many foreigners are in Bulgaria. And we have not been informed by Interpol or anybody, when the Italian police, for example, had been informed and some other Western police, police departments in the Western countries have been informed by Interpol. And when Agca had been there for more than 50 days, they did nothing too. I think that this could not be an argument at all, because our police did our best and it arrested, for example, Celenk. And he's going to comment on his position tomorrow on the press conference.

KOPPEL: And we will watch and listen with interest.